

Viewing a Voiceless Ghost: Scotland's 'Walking Spirits' and Johnson's Highland Fling

The premiss of this paper is that mysticism, myth and nationalism were the ghosts that stalked Samuel Johnson's "transit...over the Caledonian Hemisphere" in 1773, drawing from Johnson the same ambivalent reactions which any kind of ghost was likely to induce in him: "All argument is against it; but all belief is for it." As he passes through a romanticised region, he wrestles with the "frigid philosophy" that would have him do so "indifferent and unmoved." Is there a kind of theatre in which it is *not* desirable—and not possible, either—for the spectators to be "always in their senses"?

Johnson, therefore, may arrive lashed to the mast of Enlightenment progressivism, and bent on resisting or ignoring "the syrens of destruction"; but his mission, not to praise but to bury the ancient and customary way of life, is soon at risk of unravelling. To Johnson, the ghostly glamour of Flora MacDonald and of all she stood for becomes the glow-worm which "is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over him, and its fascinations are irresistible." In the end, whether the old world of legend and sentimental nationalism is well lost or not is a question on which opposing hemispheres have to agree to differ. Argument and belief are at odds.